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C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000536

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, PRM
LONDON FOR TSOU
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TAGS: PREF PGOV KTIP IZ SY
SUBJECT: UNHCR UPDATES DONOR NATIONS ON IRAQI REFUGEES IN SYRIA

REF: A. DAMASCUS 434
¶B. DAMASCUS 501

Classified By: CDA Raymond D. Maxwell for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: UNHCR officials held an information sharing meeting on July 28 to discuss: (1) increasing problems for refugees in renewing their residence permits; (2) the closing of the Al-Tanf refugee camp; (3) food distribution programs; and (4) families returning to Iraq. Additionally, WFP representatives said the UN Joint Assessment Mission (JAM) on Iraqi refugees in Syria would publish its report in early August. End Summary.

¶2. (C) During a July 28 meeting with donor states and NGOs, UNHCR Acting Resident Representative Philippe Leclerc introduced his permanent replacement, Renata Dubini, former UNHCR chief in Liberia. Contacts have characterized Dubini as "tough" and said she had an excellent reputation in Geneva as a good diplomat.

Arrests while Renewing Residence Permits

¶3. (SBU) UNHCR reported increasing numbers of refugees fear deportation as the SARG has reportedly arrested and attempted to deport about 10 refugees weekly for the past month. Leclerc said refugees had been arrested for "minor offenses" that in the past had not "resulted in deportation," such as expired residence permits and disputes with employers. Arrests of women on charges of prostitution, many of whom were potential victims of trafficking and forced prostitution, remained a concern.

¶4. (SBU) Not all arrests led to deportation, Leclerc said. When notified of an arrest, UNHCR officials have intervened on refugees' behalf to determine if they should be placed in a trafficking shelter or if a foreign country would approve an expedited resettlement visa.

¶5. (SBU) Leclerc said the approximately 10 arrests weekly are only those reported to UNHCR, and the actual number could be higher. He said monitoring this issue would be challenging but important in determining if it worsens. The situation is delicate, he said, because "we cannot take for granted" Syria's continued acceptance of Iraqi refugees.

¶6. (SBU) Leclerc and Dubini discussed this issue with Vice FM

Faysal Miqdad, who explained the up-tick in arrests as resulting from a SARG crackdown on falsified documents, a problem which would be addressed in a forthcoming refugee draft law. (Note: Lawmakers have been working on this bill since 2007.) Leclerc cited social situations that might drive refugees to petty crime and to buy fake documents, even with real information, in order to avoid Syrian bureaucracy.

Al-Tanf Refugee Camp to Close?

¶ 17. (C) UNHCR still aims to close the Al-Tanf Iraqi-Palestinian refugee camp by year's end (ref A), according to Leclerc. Miqdad promised UNHCR officials Syria would not "refill" the camp with new refugees as UNHCR worked to resettle the camp's current population. (Note: A Norwegian diplomat who visited Al-Tanf on July 29 told Emboffs the camp's current population is between 600 and 700. Recently the United Kingdom agreed to take 50 refugees and Italy accepted 150.) Miqdad said he had stopped SARG security services from sending arrested refugees back to the camp, as they had done in the past. Leclerc admitted resettling the remaining refugees in the camp would be difficult, but he was hopeful more nations would open their doors.

New Food Distribution Programs

¶ 18. (SBU) A new WFP distribution program began July 26 and will provide food baskets to 29,700 families in Damascus and 6,900 families outside Damascus. The program has two distribution sites in Damascus and 12 outside the city, with one more under consideration in al-Hasaka. The program also provides vouchers for school uniforms and additional financial assistance to 500 families. The current distribution ends August 10.

¶ 19. (SBU) WFP decided to address long-standing complaints about its food basket by adding canned fish and dropping between five and 10 kilos of beans (ref B). A new Joint Assessment Mission (JAM) document detailing these changes will be published in August.

Few Families Returning to Iraq

¶ 10. (C) Leclerc previewed a forthcoming UNHCR survey of 1,500 refugees, noting 95 percent of those questioned had no desire to return to Iraq in the "short term." Indeed, only 981 families have returned to Iraq with UNHCR assistance. Approximately 10 percent of those have since returned to Syria, though they have not re-registered with UNHCR.

¶ 11. (SBU) Leclerc suggested the Iraqi government remained ineffective at providing assistance to families returning from Syria; for example, the GOI provides about \$860 USD to returning families, but the payment usually comes about five to six months late.

¶ 12. (C) Comment: The population in Al-Tanf has dropped by one or two hundred since Emboffs' last visit to the camp on June 4 (ref A). Though UNHCR may fall short of its goal to close the camp by the end of 2009, it has succeeded in elevating this issue's visibility within the SARG and has won resettlement commitments from a number of countries. Still, refugees' increasing fear of deportation is troubling, especially when coupled with ineffective assistance mechanisms for helping refugees returning to Iraq.
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